

INTERVIEW WITH COLONEL DAVID B. ENYEART, USA,
DEPUTY COMMANDER, COMBINED JOINT TASK FORCE PHOENIX
VIA CONFERENCE CALL

SUBJECT: OPERATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

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THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT.

JACK HOLT (OASD PA): Colonel Enyeart, if you have opening remarks.

COL. ENYEART: Well, it's been a busy day today. It hasn't been busy on the
enemy side, so that's very fortunate for us. But General Pritt has gone on leave. He's
made me the commander while he's been gone, so I've been doing his job and my job. So
never a dull moment right now.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

And somebody else just joined us.

Who just chimed in.

Q This is -- (name inaudible).

MR. HOLT: Okay. All right, very good.

Well, let's just get started here.

Glen, do you have a question for Colonel Enyeart?

Q Yes. Actually, the biggest question that I'm hearing in the United States in terms of criticism of the Afghan campaign is that we prioritize drug war concerns over routing the Taliban and building up alliances among the tribes. Do you have a response to that?

COL. ENYEART: Did you say drug --

Q I'm sorry, can you speak -- can you repeat that? We couldn't hear a word. Can you go through that again?

Q Yes. The biggest complaint that I've heard of what we're doing in Afghanistan is that we have placed drug war concerns at the top of the list and that we are focusing more on poppy eradication, and the like, than on winning tribes over to our side and other aspects of the mission. Do you think that's a fair criticism?

COL. ENYEART: No, I don't think that's true at all for the Afghan National Army. They're concentrating on the counterterrorism that's going on here within the Taliban and al Qaeda. The Afghan National Army isn't doing anything with the poppy eradication. That's other outside agencies. And they've been called in to back up some of those outside agencies to help, but they're not concentrating on that at all.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Scott, Scott Kesterson (sp).

Q Colonel, you were here during Task Force Phoenix III, which was two years ago, is that correct?

COL. ENYEART: Yes, that's correct.

Q What type of changes have you seen in the two years and where we sit now versus what your views of things were then?

COL. ENYEART: Well, two years ago there was only one corps element with three brigades, and right now there's five corps with 10 brigades and they're spread out throughout the country. It used to be that they sent the brigade out to deal with any conflicts that were out beyond the borders of Kabul area. Now they're able to call on a regional command area to deal with any conflicts within the same area.

The Afghan National Army itself is growing not only in size, but it seems that they're growing smarter in the way they do things. They seem to be doing a lot more on their own than they used to be, always having to have U.S. or coalition support. Right now we have about 27 battalions or kandaks, what we call them here, that are able to do things on their own with minimal support within the U.S. or coalition forces. So I see that as a big change that two years ago we weren't even close to that.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q Do we just jump in on these?

MR. HOLT: Well, let's see, John, if --

Q Yeah, you know what, I'm perfectly content just listening right now. I'm just writing this down as I hear it. So I'm good. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. All right.

Andrew?

Q Colonel, Andrew Lubin (sp) here. Can you talk to us, please, about the caliber of the ANA recruit? You know, we hear a lot about how bad it is with the Iraqis, with kids turning up not knowing how to drive -- (inaudible) -- whatever. What caliber of recruit are you getting?

COL. ENYEART: Well, you do get some of that. A lot of them don't know how to drive. But we do take them and teach them how to drive from the very first basic course that we have going on.

Most of them are pretty good. I think we're getting better caliber recruits now than we did before. And the Afghan National Army recruit elements has never missed a mission on their recruiting goals. They've always had plenty to recruit.

In fact, we're recruiting so many now, we've had to split off from our Kabul military training center, where most of the basic training has gone on, and added two more basic training areas, one out in the Herat area and then one up north -- I'm sorry, one down in the Gardez area and then one up in the northern area of Mazar-e Sharif.

Q Colonel, this is Glen Reynolds (sp), if I could jump in. How is the curriculum different in training Afghan troops than what we see in basic training here in the United States, besides teaching them to drive?

COL. ENYEART: Well, a lot of them are illiterate. And one of the basic things that we do is do literacy classes to bring at least some literacy into it. That's reading and writing and actually talking the Dari language, which is the national language here. So

that is one of the biggest things. Most of the basic training that is done here is -- it does follow a U.S. instruction.

Q Colonel, this is Scott Kesterson (sp) again. During the time you were in Phoenix III, this was an American-run operation and with some ISAF assistance. Now we're seeing -- we've seen a hand-off over to NATO. Can you comment on how that has affected or changed operations for you?

COL. ENYEART: Well, it's good to have our NATO comrades working with us. They bring a certain element with us that -- they do things a little bit different. It's not that it's wrong different, it's they just do things different and they get to the same goal. The more -- we're continuing to request more and more NATO forces to come in and assist. As the mission keeps growing bigger and bigger and as we take over the police mission, our mission here has doubled in size. So working with ISAF and as ISAF took over most of the pieces here, we're still going through some growing pains as this is still fairly new. But it's going very well.

Q Colonel, if I can jump in, this is Mark Finkelstein from NewsBusters. For whatever reason, it seems that back home most of the media attention tends to be on training efforts in Iraq rather than in Afghanistan. And most Americans and even perhaps some members of Congress know the difference between the Shi'a and the Sunnis. But I would say that on the one hand, you face a very similar situation in Afghanistan with many different ethnic groups, and you have had success in recruiting and training people coming from those different groups.

Can you, just for educational purposes, talk to us a little bit about the major ethnic groups that you are dealing with and the ways that you've been successful in recruiting and training people from those different groups?

COL. ENYEART: Well, when the recruits come in, they go into a holding area, and we hold them there until we get the right ethnic balance. All across Afghanistan within the Afghan National Army is ethnically balanced. And you've got Pashtuns, you have Tajik, you've got Hazara. So there's about 14 different tribes that you have, or ethnological groups that you have here. So before a battalion can start within the Kabul Military Training Center, they have to have the right basic ethnic balance.

Q Interesting. So each of your battalions internally has a balance. You don't simply have balance across the entire army.

COL. ENYEART: Well, we do have balance across the army. In fact, if they remove or move a commander or a key leader, the person that has to go in there has to be from that same tribe. So if they remove a Pashtun commander, a Pashtun commander has to go back into that place.

Q But -- I take that point, but also, within a given battalion, there's also ethnic balance. Is that it?

COL. ENYEART: Yes. When they start off from Kabul Military Training Center, they're ethnically balanced, and then as they go out, they'll go together as a cohort unit to a region, and they stay ethnically balanced. If they start losing a certain ethnic balance, then they'll pull from one of the graduating candidates for filler elements to fulfill the ethnic balance again.

Q That's very interesting. And again, I think it's something that we hear very little about at home. I'm glad to have the opportunity to learn it from you.

COL. ENYEART: I can tell you a story, that they had the Afghan National Army go up into a village way up in the central part of Afghanistan, and the villagers have never seen their national army there. And they were amazed that they could tell the different the tribal or ethnic groups. And it just gave them such good insight that here their army as a true national army; it wasn't just from one tribe like they had been in the past.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Has everybody had a chance to ask a question?

Q (Off mike.)

MR. HOLT: All right. In --

Q Can we follow up a little bit?

MR. HOLT: Say again?

Q Yeah, one more. Andrew Lubnyev (sp). On the -- talk about the differences between the Iraqi recruits and your ANA recruits. Would you -- would it be fair to say your -- I don't want to put words in your mouth -- are they a more -- do they have more initiative in Afghanistan? You know, being more tribal and being on their own, do they have more of a spirit and less bureaucracy than they -- than what we see out of Iraq?

COL. ENYEART: I can just talk about what's going on in Afghanistan. And the Afghan National Army is a very spirited army. They are not afraid to go after the enemy, and they're not afraid to die for their country.

Q And they see themselves as -- Afghanistan as being -- they have a country, they see a national identity?

COL. ENYEART: They do now. They -- the best thing that's going for the Afghanistan country is the Afghan National Army. It's the most positive thing going on for this country.

Q Okay. Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Anybody else?

Q This is Scott Kesterson (sp) again. Colonel, can you speak a little bit now about the refocusing now from the ANA mission and to the ANP mission, and the ANAP mission, and that means and how -- what the philosophy is behind that?

COL. ENYEART: Yeah, the Task Force Phoenix here just took over the -- working the Afghan National Police mission, oh, about a month ago now. And we're just starting to get involved in sending mentors down to the different provincial and district regions to assist in, well, for one, making sure that all the police have had their basic police training, and then also to get a real good baseline of -- if they're getting paid, if they have been trained, or any other additional training going on.

So Task Force Phoenix has taken that on and just -- it just initially started here about, you know, 30 days ago. And we're out at the different regions now and then also sending police support teams out to get the baseline.

The reason we started with this is that you'll never have enough Afghan National Army to cover the whole country, and so you got to train up the police to fill in the areas that the army cannot be at all the time and to keep the terrorists and the counterinsurgencies out of the area.

Q This is Glen Reynolds (sp). If I could follow up, I know in Afghanistan -- or rather in Iraq we've had some corruption issues, particularly with soldier pay sometimes not making it down to the soldiers, and that's had to be addressed.

You mentioned something about the Afghan National Police being paid. Have we had similar problems in Afghanistan, or has that been headed off?

COL. ENYEART: Well, corruption is a way of life here, and it's not like we see it in the United States as something that's wrong. It's a way of their survival, and they've been doing it for such a long time of skimming off the top. And it's our job as mentors to teach them that this is not really the right way to go, and you will not be able to build an honorable team or section by doing this. And so by us mentoring and telling them and also making sure that they do get paid -- and then also part of our pay reforms, we've upped some of the pay for the police, so they don't have to, you know, go into corruption.

Q Yes. I have some experience with Nigeria, where it's pretty much literally impossible to live on the salaries they pay, and you kind of have to be corrupt to get by. And you certainly want to avoid that.

COL. ENYEART: And we've bumped up the police salary and also have bumped up the Afghan National Army salary to above the national salary, which is about \$45 a year -- a month, I'm sorry.

Q Colonel, it's Mark Finkelstein again.

We see a lot of reports about the resurgence of the Taliban and predictions of a spring offensive. Could you talk to that? Are you seeing such a resurgence on the ground? And I'm just finding it so odd that, you know, there's -- everybody seems to be forecasting, you know, an offensive of, you know -- I don't know what happened to the element of surprise. But could you talk to those two issues: the resurgence of the Taliban and the prospects of this spring offensive?

COL. ENYEART: Well, we know there's going to be a spring offensive. There always is. There has been for -- year after year. They get through the winter and survive the winter, and as they -- you know, the enemy trains up, they come into a spring offensive.

We believe that this offensive is going to be probably the worst one they've had here in quite a while. Lieutenant General Eikenberry, you know, said before Congress that it's just going to be one of the worst offensives. And also, if the Taliban do not make it through this offensive, we feel that by next year they'll have limited access to Afghanistan.

Q So this could be the -- a key fight, in other words, if we can defeat them in this offensive?

COL. ENYEART: Yes. And we're also operating in more and more areas -- in areas we haven't been before and in the areas that they've been hiding out in. So we're pushing them around quite a bit, and that's why you're seeing a lot more activity in some areas.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: All right. Any more questions?

All right, sir. Colonel, do you have any closing remarks?

COL. ENYEART: Just that this is a winnable war over here, and everybody's positive here about that. Something that we didn't have when I was here last time was -- it was U.S. wanted the war to be over with and for Afghanistan to be a secure state at that time. Now it's more of the Afghans want the war to be over with, and they want a secure state themselves. So it's more of them pushing forward than it is the U.S.

MR. HOLT: Well, all right, sir. And we thank you very much for spending some time with us this morning, and your insights on the operations of the ANA and the Mediterranean teams there in Afghanistan. And hopefully we can do this again.

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